

Chapter 6

Community Relations



Introduction

Whether a biosolids storage site is located in a remote area or in one that is more densely populated, developing a relationship between project proponents and the surrounding community is critical to successful field storage. The public's view of the benefits of biosolids recycling and the necessity for biosolids storage, as part of well-run land application programs, frequently are balanced by concerns regarding potential environmental, health or nuisance impacts. Issues commonly raised about storage sites include potential odors, noise, dust, traffic, human or animal health effects, and water quality or environmental impairment. These concerns are often linked to broader issues such as potential impacts on property values, compatibility with other land uses, and political issues. For these reasons, biosolids field storage projects, either in small field stockpiles or in large, permanently constructed facilities, should include a community relations program. The relationship that the storer/applier develops with the community is just as, or more important than, the one between the biosolids generator and the applier. Table 6-1 identifies potential issues and community concerns related to field storage of biosolids.

Table 6-1. Common Issues and Community Concerns about Field Storage of Biosolids

Issue	Community Concerns
Air Quality	Odors, dust and pathogens
Water Quality	Surface runoff to streams and well water contamination with respect to nutrients, toxic metals, organics and pathogens
Public and Animal Health	Contact and potential disease transmission, inadequate buffer zones, and animal grazing
Traffic and Safety	Posting and access control, road conditions and speeding
Aesthetics	Odors; visibility, noise, dust and property values

The ultimate goal of the community relations program is to develop public acceptance of biosolids storage within the community. The size and extent of the community relations program depends on public interest more so than on project size. In general, large, capital intensive, constructed storage facilities, and facilities in high population areas, will require the greatest community relations effort. It is not uncommon for large constructed facilities at remote sites to attract less public interest than smaller highly visible projects.

Extensive education and outreach programs are most efficiently conducted on an ongoing basis, in the context of an entire biosolids recycling program, not just the storage component. Communications efforts related to storage issues would be most appropriately handled by being integrated into ongoing community relations efforts conducted by biosolids managers and WWTPs. Outreach programs should be initiated as early as possible, when biosolids projects are in the initial planning phase. The public desires a voice in activities that may impact their community, and they need to know that biosolids managers share their concerns and are responsive to their comments. Seeking early input from local officials and the citizens during the planning phase is the best way to gain public support. Active listening and responsiveness to public concerns builds trust and ensures that the project fits successfully into the community.

Communications programs should present all the pros and cons of a proposed storage site relative to its role in the land application program. Risks should be explained in terms that are understandable to the public. Biosolids generators, storers and appliers must be able to provide concrete answers in response to questions and concerns. Before a community can be involved, it must be informed and invited to participate. The basic communications elements that should be implemented prior to the initiation of any biosolids storage activities, especially long-term constructed facilities, are as follows:

1. At the inception of the project, arrange to brief local officials and staff (i.e. county supervisors, planning and zoning staff, Extension Service and soil conservation district staff) one-to-one on your plans. Solicit their input on suitable sites and potential local concerns.
2. Inform adjacent property owners and the local community particularly for constructed facilities. This may be accomplished through informal contacts and/or as part of formal notices and meetings or hearings associated with state or local permitting requirements.
3. Look for ways to adapt your project to accommodate legitimate local concerns. Be prepared to address the pros and cons of the project and hand out fact sheets answering the most frequently asked questions. Invite local officials and concerned citizens to tour existing field stockpiles or constructed facilities.
4. Develop a plan to promptly and effectively address public questions or complaints on an ongoing basis once the site is in operation. Be sure people know how to get in touch with you and maintain open channels of communication and feedback throughout the life of the project.

Audience Assessment



Managers of biosolids projects should consider that the "public" is not one homogenous group. Community relations efforts will be more effective if education and outreach efforts are targeted and tailored to address the particular concerns and interests of specific groups within the community. Key subgroups frequently involved in siting and operation of field storage areas are:

Elected Officials/Local Government Agencies

These individuals and organizations may have a regulatory role in the siting and development of storage facilities. They may have a role in selecting biosolids management options for their community. Elected officials in particular will want to ensure that the concerns of their constituencies are addressed.

Citizens Groups

Established organizations in the community (e.g., Rotary Clubs, the Chamber of Commerce, League of Women Voters) as well as ad-hoc groups established in response to the proposed project may be interested in storage projects. Their concerns may focus on the potential impacts of the biosolids activity on the immediate community, and include a wide range of topics (e.g., economic development, property values, agricultural and open space preservation, traffic impacts, aesthetics and health and environmental protection).



Agricultural Organizations

Organizations such as the Farm Bureau, USDA Cooperative Extension Service, Natural Resources Conservation Service and local Soil Conservation districts frequently take an interest in biosolids storage and land application programs from the perspective of providing economic benefits to farmers and landowners, and ensuring long-term protection and improvement of soil and water resources. In addition, organizations such as local conservation districts are excellent sources of technical information to assist in appropriate site selection and project development. Their participation in the project will help assure that local concerns are addressed.



Environmental Organizations

National environmental groups with local chapters and groups dedicated to local and regional environmental issues may take an interest in biosolids storage and use projects. Their focus may be related to water quality, environmental protection and improvement; recycling, or land use and development issues.



Local Media

Local media includes newspapers, television and radio stations that generally focus on public discussion on such issues.

Biosolids Users

Members of the local community who have personal experience using or storing biosolids on their properties should be requested to share their

perspectives on the pros and cons involved. Generally people who are known and respected in the community are a key source of information.



Employees

Employees (contracting agency and biosolids land applier/storer), particularly those that reside in the local community, are also a valuable part of community relations efforts. Employees should be briefed on the project. They can share information on the project through their informal contacts in the community, help ensure that public inquiries are promptly referred to the appropriate individual in the organization, or serve as representatives to area-wide planning groups, technical advisory committees or other community organizations.

Working successfully with diverse community groups may take special communication and mediation knowledge, training and experience. Assistance from a public relations professional may be needed.

Educational Tools

Once various audiences and issues are identified, there are a number of mechanisms that can be used to effectively disseminate educational materials and open lines of communication and participation. The following is a list of the most commonly used methods and pointers for using them effectively:

One to One meetings

The most effective community relations tool is usually one-to-one personal contacts. Identifying key individuals in the community and spending the time to meet with them personally is the best way to disseminate information, gain credibility and ensure that local concerns are identified and addressed.

News and media coverage

Publish meeting dates, times and locations. Invite the press to public meetings, tours or field days. Provide briefing packages on the project and contacts. Provide interviews or issue news releases.

Newsletters

Broad circulation of educational information can be achieved by contacting local organizations and asking them to feature an article you have prepared concerning the proposed biosolids project (e.g., agricultural extension service, chamber of commerce, environmental groups).

Fact Sheets/Displays

Develop fact sheets and displays for use at public meetings, libraries, and local events.

Public Meetings/Hearings

Offer to make presentations about biosolids at meetings of various groups. If public interest or regulatory requirements mandate it, conduct public meetings or hearings specifically concerning the proposed storage project.

Presentations to Schools/Youth Activities

Presentations to schools directly increase students' level of knowledge, and may result in second hand education of parents as well. Sponsoring student activities is a gesture of community support, and may provide another venue for disseminating project information to the public.



Tours/Field Days

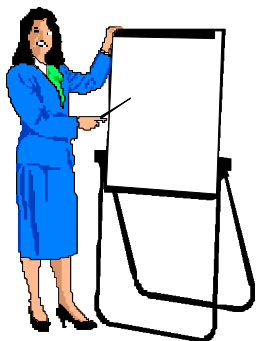
Participate in local agricultural field days through on-site demonstrations, presentations, or exhibits. Organize educational tours of biosolids storage and land application sites for specific groups (e.g., local reporters, elected officials, community or environmental organizations).

Community Advisory Committees

Assemble a community or technical advisory committee. This type of community involvement is generally limited to situations involving permanent constructed storage facilities. Frequently such committees will be formed at the request of the local government. Committees of this nature take a more active role in the planning and design or storage facilities, management and operational plans and project oversight.



Program Evaluation



The success or effectiveness of a community relations program can be evaluated based on some of the following:

- Requests for information
- The tone of news articles and media coverage
- Endorsement from various organizations
- Absence of organized opposition to the facility and the continued operation of storage and land application activities.

It is important that once a program is through the initial planning stages, that on-going contact and communication is maintained in order to obtain regular feedback and address any local issues that arise promptly and effectively.

